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FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4467
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SOFIA 001272

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: RULING SOCIALISTS, POPULIST GERB CLAIM VICTORY IN LOCAL
ELECTIONS

Ref: (A) SOFIA 1259, (B) SOFIA 1176, (C) SOFIA 1269, (D) SOFIA 678

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: PM Sergei Stanishev's ruling Socialists and the populist GERB party of Sofia Mayor Boiko Borissov both claimed victory in the October 28 local vote, as party leaders spun the outcome of the hotly contested election. The Socialists said they had won the bulk of the nationwide vote for municipal counselors. GERB won the mayoral races in Sofia and Plovdiv, the two biggest cities, and won most votes in larger towns, but fell short of a hoped-for national landslide victory. The Socialists retained their traditionally strong base in rural areas and small towns. The overall picture will be clearer after the November 4 mayoral run-off elections in which mostly Socialist and GERB candidates will face off. Turnout was around 42 percent, normal for European mid-term elections. The vote was marred by massive allegations of vote buying, with price reportedly running as high as 300 leva (USD 120). END SUMMARY

SOCIALISTS CLAIM VICTORY DESPITE SOFIA LOSS

12. (SBU) The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which dominates the ruling three-part coalition, claimed national victory in the election despite a clear defeat in Sofia where its candidate, former external intelligence officer Brigo Asparuhov came in a lackluster third (Ref. A). M Stanishev said his party captured the bulk of the votes for municipal counselors across the country, terming the outcome a "mid-term success" for his ruling party. The PM quoted preliminary results based on 70 percent of the vote counted, which showed that the BSP had captured some 21.0 percent of the vote, followed by GERB with 17.4 percent, the predominantly ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) with 14.0 percent, and extreme nationalist Ataka party with 8.0 percent. The National Movement for Simeon II (NMSS) won 2.67 percent of the votes for municipal counselors, followed by the traditional center-right parties - the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and ex-PM Ivan Kostov's Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB) with about 2.2 percent each, the PM said. (The Central Electoral Commission does not publish consolidated nationwide results for political parties because they form different coalitions in different municipalities. Ref. B)

13. (SBU) A visibly cheerful Stanishev told an election night news conference that predictions about an electoral collapse of the BSP have not come true and the result was a "clear success" for the BSP, especially given the teachers' strike and rising consumer prices (Ref. C). He noted that forecasts for a GERB landslide had not materialized, adding that the results gave no grounds for Borissov to seek an early vote for parliament. The PM saw his two-year government completing a full term in office through mid-2009, and vowed to stick to his current policies of political and economic stability.

14. (SBU) The internal Socialist opposition nevertheless attacked the PM, saying the BSP's defeat in Sofia was a "slap in BSP's face." Asparuhov, the failed Socialist candidate who is a key figure in the BSP's hard-line Generals' Movement, said the BSP's loss in Sofia was a "catastrophe." He blamed his defeat on the BSP leadership, claiming their reformist policies had alienated the BSP base. The PM ignored his comrades' attack, attributing BSP's loss to the traditionally low support for the Socialists in Sofia, which has been a center-right stronghold since communism collapsed.

GERB DOMINATES IN BIGGER CITIES

15. (SBU) Seen as the rising force on the domestic political scene, Borissov's GERB party won the mayoral races in the two biggest cities, Sofia and Plovdiv, and captured the biggest share of the vote for municipal counselors in many of the larger towns. In Sofia, Borissov, who served as Interior Ministry Secretary before becoming mayor in 2005, won re-election with 53 percent of the votes, compared to around 18 percent for center-right candidate Martin Zaimov and around 15 percent for BSP's Asparuhov. (The Sofia electoral commission has not yet announced the final result and BSP officials say it is still possible that their candidate may come in second.) Once again, debates over Borissov's questionable past and at least superficial ties to local organized crime leaders have not eroded public support for the former firefighter and bodyguard. At a news conference October 29, Borissov questioned the Socialists' claims for a victory, saying that GERB has edged out the Socialists as it did in the May election for members of the European Parliament (Ref. D). According to Borissov, a total of 591,969 citizens across the country backed his party compared to 512,230 for the BSP. He said the election result asserted GERB's position as a leading political force in Bulgaria and legitimized it as the biggest force on the center-right. Borissov retreated from his previous calls for early general elections, giving evasive answers to repeated questions on the subject. He did not miss the opportunity to boast again about his "special ties with the U.S.," noting his close cooperation with U.S. law enforcement services during his tenure at

the Interior Ministry.

STRONG SHOWING FOR ETHNIC TURKS, NATIONALISTS

¶6. (SBU) The predominantly ethnic Turkish MRF, a junior coalition partner in the government, retained its dominance in areas with a majority ethnic Turkish population. It defended its traditional stronghold Kurdzhali, a northeastern town where the incumbent MRF mayor won an outright victory. With what many saw as arrogant indifference to public reaction, the MRF continued its practice of bussing dual citizens from Turkey to vote for the MRF, despite legal changes aimed at curbing this practice. Eighty-nine busses with Bulgarian nationals living in Turkey were reported to have crossed the border on October 27-28. The phenomenon, known as "electoral tourism," has stirred deep passions among ethnic Bulgarians and partly explains the strong showing of extreme nationalist Ataka, running on anti-MRF rhetoric.

¶7. (SBU) Strongly anti-U.S. and anti-EU, Ataka retained its highly energized base, defeating expectations that the bulk of its supporters would migrate to GERB. Ataka leader Volen Siderov said the result was a success for his young party, which has become an important factor in Bulgarian politics since its launch in mid-2005. Candidates of Ataka have made it to the run-off in two major towns, Burgas and Blagoevgrad, according to preliminary results. Siderov accused the BSP-led coalition of election fraud, saying the results in MRF-controlled municipalities had been manipulated and is seeking to disqualify the vote because of the use of transparent ballot boxes.

BREATH OF LIFE FOR THE OLD CENTER-RIGHT?

¶8. (SBU) The traditional center-right parties -- the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) and ex-PM Ivan Kostov's Democrats for Strong Bulgaria (DSB) -- scored relatively well given their waning support. Two joint center-right candidates in major towns won re-election in the first round. The center-right candidate's second place in Sofia was also viewed as success although many center-right voters in Sofia have migrated to GERB. Center-right leaders said they hoped the local vote would give an impetus for cooperation on a national scale and revival of the traditional center-right, which has been in disarray since 2001.

¶9. (SBU) Ex-PM Simeon Saxe-Coburg's National Movement for Simeon II (NMSS), a junior partner in the government, registered an election loss similar to its disastrous showing in the 2003 local vote. The results reflect falling support for the ex-king's party, torn by high-profile infighting and a legal dispute about the legitimacy of the party leadership. NMSS officials put the best face on a humiliating result, noting that some NMSS-backed mayoral candidates have made it to the run-off.

MASSIVE VOTE BUYING

¶10. (SBU) This year's local election saw a surge in the practice of buying votes, a phenomenon especially widespread in regions with large Roma populations and on the Black Sea coast, where the vote was contested by many "business parties," i.e., regional parties linked to local businesses seeking direct representation in local administrations. The price of one vote reportedly varied from 20 to 300 leva (USD 220) with stakes going up considerably this year because of the municipalities' increased powers to manage hundreds of millions of euros in EU structural funds. If there is a bright spot, it is the widespread citizen anger at the practice and demands that it be cleaned up. The Interior Ministry has launched investigations based on eyewitness accounts and citizen complaints.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: The specifics of the local election, characterized as "the vote with many winners," allowed rival parties to claim "victory." What is clear is that BSP and GERB have emerged as the leading forces in Bulgarian politics and will likely shape the next parliament. Borissov's party scored well but failed to achieve the sweeping election victory it hoped for, thus making early elections less likely. The party has yet to evolve from a Borissov-centered phenomenon into a traditional party based on a clear ideology. GERB and another anti-status quo party, extreme nationalist Ataka, captured the bulk of the protest vote against the Socialist-led coalition. GERB's strong representation at the local level, coupled with strikes by civil servants and ongoing BSP infighting, will generate political tensions but is not likely to force early elections. PM Stanishev's problems stem more from internal party attacks and the need to maintain his equilibrium within the BSP and the three-party coalition. The overall picture will be clearer after the run-off on November 4. END COMMENT.